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Viewing cable 06PARTO9, U) Secretary Rice's February 23 Meeting with

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06PARTO9	2006-03-02 20:41	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	US Delegation, Secretary

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARTO 000009

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SY, IS

SUBJECT: (U) Secretary Rice's February 23 Meeting with

Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

¶1. (U) Classified by: Arnold Chacon, Deputy Executive Secretary, S/ES, Department of State. Reason 1.4.(d)

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¶2. (U) February 23, 2006; 1150 Beirut, Lebanon

¶3. (SBU) Participants:

U.S.
The Secretary
Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman
Deputy Assistant to the President Elliott Abrams
A/S C.David Welch, NEA

Lebanon
Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri
Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh
Amal Party Foreign Affairs Advisor Ali Hamdan

¶4. (C) SUMMARY. In a February 23 meeting at his official residence, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri told the Secretary that he did not see any other way except through dialogue to address a wide range of issues facing Lebanon. He expressed dismay that some politicians questioned his initiative to launch a national dialogue on March 2. If other political leaders insisted on a delay or on sending subordinates, Berri preferred cancelling the dialogue. On the issue of replacing President Lahoud, Berri said that he sided with the Maronite Patriarch on a peaceful and legal transition, with the question of who should be Lebanon's new president addressed first by the Christians. END SUMMARY.

DIALOGUE ONLY WAY FORWARD

¶5. (C) Speaker Berri opened the meeting by listing what he described as critical issues facing Lebanon: implementation of UNSCR 1559, the investigation into Hariri's murder, any international tribunal to describe murder suspects, demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border, and the exchange of diplomatic relations with Syria. He explained that he did not see any other way except dialogue, based on the 1989 Taif accord that ended Lebanon's civil war, to address these issues.

¶6. (C) Thus, Berri explained, he has proposed a March 2-9 national dialogue, to be held "seven days and seven nights," complete with sleeping arrangements and meals, for parliamentary bloc leaders. Without such a dialogue, some parliamentary bloc leaders would not meet and not talk. He claimed to have received support for his initiative from Qatar, Egypt, Russia, the United

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States (through the Ambassador), and France. "All want to see dialogue," Berri said.

DISMAYED THAT SOME WANT DELAY

¶7. (C) Yet Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja' and Druse leader Walid Jumblatt have both hinted that they want to delay the dialogue. Berri said that their desire to remove the president first made no sense. If President Lahoud is removed, then the cabinet also becomes, constitutionally, a caretaker cabinet. Both

the president and the cabinet must be replaced. In Berri's view, there is no reason to have a dialogue in that place. He said that, if people insist on a delay of his dialogue, "I prefer to cancel it." Berri also noted that he insists on parliamentary bloc leaders, not substitutes, in the dialogue. Any subordinate, he explained, would not be able to take decisions until conferring with his leadership.

STANDING WITH PATRIARCH
REGARDING REPLACING LAHOUD

17. (C) As for replacing President Emile Lahoud, Berri said that he did not understand the sudden push. Lahoud's credibility was lost long ago. Moreover, because of Lebanon's parliamentary calendar, the March 14 deadline for his resignation announced by the March 14 coalition did not make sense -- parliament could not meet in plenary session before March 21. Moreover, the March 14 coalition did not have the two-thirds needed for a parliamentary quorum to replace the president.

18. (C) The Secretary noted that there seems to be a strong sense in Lebanon that now is the time to move on. While legal and peaceful means should be pursued, President Lahoud has lost the confidence of the international community and of the Lebanese people. Berri said that he stands with the Patriarch. The president must be the president for all of Lebanon, but he must have a special relationship with the Maronites. Berri said that he supported Cardinal Sfeir's positions that peaceful and legal means must be used and that who comes next should be clear in advance. "I'm against doing anything by force," Berri said. The Secretary noted that the Patriarch's position that the president must be for all of the Lebanese is an important message. Yes, Berri agreed, "but the Christians must move first. I have to respect the choice of the Christians and the Maronites in particular."
RICE